



THE HARD, RIGHT THINGS AT THE RIGHT TIME

"Leadership Makes the Difference"

by Gerald D Sentell | October 18, 2004 |

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The performance of organizations of all kinds has been the subject of intense criticism for decades. These criticisms can be boiled down to the fact that most organizations—public and private, business and educational, government and non-government—have been “over managed and under led.”

Leadership can and does make the difference in sustained high levels of organizational performance. It is worth pausing and reviewing just exactly what we mean when we talk about leadership in this context.

There is a tendency of many—especially successful managers themselves—to view managers as administrators of the status quo, emotionally detached from their work and the organizations of which they are part. Leaders, on the other hand, are seen as innovators who introduce new approaches and achieve excitement and fulfillment through their ability to inspire and, yes, lead their organizations to new heights of performance.

Despite the rather extreme differences in popular perception, good leaders can—and should—be good managers and vice versa. The ultimate success of any organization is dependent upon the inspiration and leadership provided especially by the “person at the top.” Good leaders are also known for selecting subordinates who are both good leaders and managers in their own right.

In high performing organizations, leaders at all levels must be able to act swiftly, decisively, and when necessary, with as much force as required. They must ensure that performance in every part of the organization improves at a rate that stays ahead of ever-increasing levels of customer expectations and competition.

Effective leaders understand the importance of providing clear standards for everyone in the organization. Standards are much more than simple targets or prescribed behavior. Properly developed, well-communicated standards provide the mechanisms for focusing the organization on the things that are important and for expressing performance expectations and measuring compliance and provide management with effective means for monitoring and improving performance.

In his autobiography, General H. Norman Schwarzkopf wrote of the importance of standards when he reflected on his service under General Latham in Alaska:

“The General also set me and my staff to work writing standards for our commanders. By summer we had a single sheet of paper for each type of platoon that spelled out the skills we expected that unit to master...I could hand that paper to the platoon leader and tell him ‘This is how I will measure your unit’s performance. I will never grade you on anything that is not on this sheet.’ Meanwhile, Latham promulgated individual standards for fitness in Arctic and mountaineering skills. His lists enabled us to focus our preparations in a way I’d never imagined possible.”

Effective leaders set performance standards for the organization, its component parts, and individual members in light of their expectations about how achievement-oriented people are motivated. Expectations have a tendency to become self-fulfilling prophecies: low expectations lead to poor performance; high (but attainable) expectations lead to high levels of performance. Leaders, who believe that most people want to contribute, and lead them accordingly, are almost always able to take their organizations to higher levels of sustained performance.

A leader’s style also has profound impacts on both the organization’s culture and its performance. Practical and effective leaders maintain constancy of themes and expectations which they communicate frequently, consistently and through all manner of media including dramatics, folklore, symbolism, and especially through personal example.

The ideal leader understands that people, rather than techniques, are what really matter. High performance leaders “Lead” in every sense of that term, toward the achievement of personal and organizational excellence. The leader’s values serve as the glue that holds the structure together and signals “who we are” and “what we believe.” Implementing these values is an expression of the leader’s commitment.

High performance leaders also recognize that the energies of human potential in organizations are released through decentralization and explicitly defined delegation of responsibility and authority. In the words of an accomplished high performance leader who is also a friend, "Empowerment without accountability is like giving a loaded pistol to a monkey." Even if the monkey is well-intended the results can be devastating for all concerned, including the monkey.

Leaders are also responsible for providing and allocating the resources required for the organization to fulfill its mission. The decision of what resources to allocate and where to allocate them is "where the rubber meets the road" in the implementation of leadership.

In traditional organizations managers strive to maintain maximum control. In high performing organizations leaders delegate control but remain engaged through monitoring performance as compared to the established standards.

It is the leader who provides the training, resources, and structures that enable people to perform at the highest possible levels. Rather than instructing people in what management perceives as remedies, training and resources must be allocated to people who have been empowered to solve problems. The involvement of people leads to their self-fulfillment which, in turn, contributes to outcomes that usually exceed normal expectations.

The major causes of leadership failure include:

- Excessive anxiety which cripples the leader's perceptions, memory, thought and decision-making abilities
- Clinging to worn-out ideas and the inability or unwillingness to seek new and better ways of doing things
- The tendency to reject or ignore information that conflicts with existing beliefs and expectations—the greater the impact of the new information, the more strenuously it is resisted

The common thread among these causes of leadership failure is the fear of having to make fundamental changes in the way the organization and the people in it function. Many years ago Dr. J. Laurence Peter championed the idea that managers rise to their level of incompetence—the so-called "Peter Principle." The common characteristic of incompetence is not that good people are promoted until they reach incompetence; rather it is that they reached their lofty spot in the organization by functioning a certain way and they continue to function the same way regardless of what is now required of them. This is how good middle managers become poor senior executives. They do what they know how to do and are capable of doing, not what needs to be done.

The person who really needs to believe in the viability of the organization and its ability performed at sustained high levels is the organization's leader. Using the authority inherent in his or her position, the leader can set in motion a chain of events that will transform the entire organization. Under enlightened, effective leadership change can be cascaded through the organization.

Effecting these changes and making it work requires a leadership style dramatically different from the traditional style associated with hard-nosed, no-nonsense managers of lore. First, effective leaders must be excellent communicators (and must recall that communication involves listening and responding as well as transmitting messages). Second, they must lead by example, exuding a sense of calm and confidence when things are not going well and maintaining a focus on the need for future improvements even when things are going wonderfully. Third, and most important of all, they must be courageous. In this context courage means that high performance leaders must always be willing to do the **hard, right thing at the right time and in the right way** no matter how difficult or personally painful this might be. Recognizing and being able and willing to do the hard, right things at the right time may very well be the most difficult of all the requirements for high performance leadership.